

Gays rebuffed

Inconsistencies cited in District 11 club policies

A group of Palmer High School students was right to sue the school over its refusal to recognize their student club, the Gay/Straight Alliance, a District 11 school board member says.

Board member Karen Teja said in an interview last week that the refusal seems inconsistent with the school district's approach to other student clubs.

"In my opinion, they have grounds for the suit," Teja said of the students. "We need to be consistent ... with what we sanction and what we don't."

Case is strong

The Colorado chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union sued Palmer in federal court on behalf of the students, on Dec 12. The students have tried since January to persuade Palmer to recognize their club, whose purpose is to "facilitate discussion between gay students, straight stu-

dents, and those who are questioning their sexual identity, on such subjects as harassment, discrimination, and bias."

Officials at Palmer, as well as the central administrative office, however, have refused the request, saying that under district policy, only "curriculum-related" clubs can be recognized, and that the Gay/Straight Alliance doesn't meet that definition.

The lawsuit, on the other hand, notes that Palmer already recognizes clubs whose curricular relevance is unclear — including a chess club, a Frisbee club and a mountain bike club. A federal statute, the Equal Access Act, requires schools to recognize all clubs on an equal basis.

"If a school permits even one noncurricular student club to use school facilities, then it must permit *all* noncurricular clubs," the lawsuit argues.

Teja said the case is strong for arguing that the Gay/Straight Alliance is as curriculum-related as some existing clubs.

"Perhaps this new group that wants to come in is aligned with our bullying policy, or our diversity curriculum," she said.

A small fortune

Palmer's principal, Karin Reynolds, would not discuss the issue. Nor would other school district officials.

"When something goes into litigation, our lawyers just more or less tell us, 'Keep your mouth shut,'" said district spokeswoman Elaine Naleski.

Besides Teja, school board members

reached by the *Independent* also wouldn't talk, other than to say that the board has not yet formally discussed the matter. "I really don't have any information," said board president Sandy Shakes.

The students bringing the suit have also been advised by the ACLU not to speak about the case.

A local gay-rights activist, meanwhile, says he's puzzled that the school district seems willing to spend money fighting the issue in court.

"It's absolutely surprising to me," said Frank Whitworth, a former leader of the gay-rights group Ground Zero. "It will cost them a small fortune to pay legal fees."

Whitworth pointed out that an estimated 50 Colorado high schools already have Gay/Straight Alliance chapters. And five years ago, students forced the Cherry Creek School District in Denver to accept a Gay/Straight Alliance by filing a similar lawsuit.

Palmer High School, however, has a history of trying to shut discussion of gay and lesbian issues out of its "sanctioned" discourse in response to pressure



District 11 school board member Karen Teja

from gay-rights opponents. In 1996, Colorado for Family Values chairman Will Perkins organized a vocal group of critics when the school's newspaper, the *Lever*, ran an article about problems gay teenagers face. Several district officials sided with Perkins, calling the article "inappropriate."

District officials also rejected a previous attempt to organize a Gay/Straight Alliance at the school in 1999.

"There's a perception that it's a very liberal school, but it's not," said Tasha Hill, director of Inside/Out Youth Services, a nonprofit group that offers support for gay and lesbian youths.

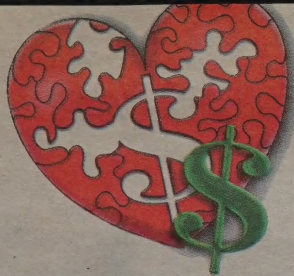
Gay and lesbian highschool students frequently face harassment and violence, and students have told Hill they feel no safer at Palmer than at other schools, she says. That's exactly why the Gay/Straight Alliance is needed, Hill argues.

"It's about an oppressed group finding a way to make school a better place for themselves."

— Terje Langeland

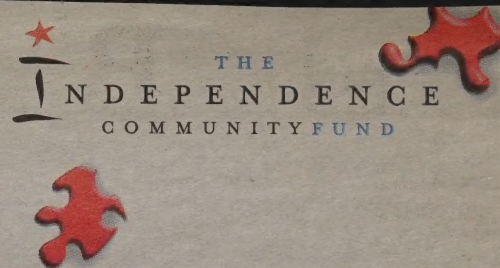
"There's a perception that it's a very liberal school, but it's not."

— Tasha Hill



MISSION STATEMENT:

To provide financial, media and technical support to Pikes Peak region nonprofits seeking to implement new community building initiatives designed to help individuals achieve independence and our community achieve sustainability.



COLORADO HOUSE & RESOURCE CENTER

COLORADO HOUSE & RESOURCE CENTER

CH&RC's helps highly motivated homeless individuals and families become self-sufficient. Developed through a unique collaborate effort by Rocky Mountain Community Land Trust, Partners In Housing and the American Red Cross, CH&RC will open its renovated facility, the former Embers Motel on Weber and Colorado Aves, on Thursday, January 22, 2004. Thirty individuals and families will soon live in this transitional housing for up to 2 years while benefiting from life skills classes, computer training, budget counseling, child enrichment services and a nurturing community.

Get Involved: Join us during our Community Volunteer Workday – Saturday, January 10 from 10:00 a.m. – 2:00 p.m. and for our Grand Opening & Ribbon Cutting ceremony on January 22 from 2:00 – 4:00 p.m. Please call number below to sign up. Also we have numerous volunteer opportunities available for mentors, speaker's bureau, computer technicians, office assistance, grant writers, and childcare providers. We also seek microwavable dishes, non-perishable foods, children's art supplies, toys and books, personal hygiene items, furniture, books, magazines, dictionaries, school/office supplies, computer software and hardware, cleaning supplies.

Contact: Sophia Nash, snash@colorado-house.org 578-9699



NEIGHBORHOOD RESTORATIVE JUSTICE PROJECT

After a crime is committed the law asks, "What law was broken?" Restorative Justice asks "How shall harm to another be repaired?" Working hand-in-hand with local law enforcement and judicial officials as well as local neighborhood organizations, NRJP's mission is to help all the individuals repair the harm and restore the relationships of those affected by a juvenile offence. If a young offender admits to his crime, then s/he will meet with the victim and neighborhood residents under the guidance of a trained volunteer facilitator in a safe setting to explore ways to help make things right. Neighborhood Restorative Justice Project is a project of the Cynergetics Institute.

Get Involved: Interested in helping victims of juvenile crime while holding the offender accountable? Want to help establish a restorative justice program in your neighborhood? Then attend our Volunteer Training Opportunity on Tuesday, January 20th from 6:30 – 8:00 p.m. We also seek donations of office supplies, laptop computers and portable printers for our facilitators.

Contact: Bill Groom, 444-8644, cynerget@aol.com



KPC KIDS' PLACE

A program of Pikes Peak Family Connections, KPC Kids Place Respite Nursery will provide 24-hour childcare for children aged 6 weeks to 6 years. Scheduled to open in 2004, KPC Kids' Place will provide up to 72 hours of care when parents are emotionally or physically unable to care for their young children, especially on an emergency basis. Nursery services are confidential, free and voluntary. KPC Kids Place will be state licensed and fully insured. Located in a lovely renovated home donated by Ascension Lutheran Church.

Get Involved: Help with building/yard maintenance, fundraising, game playing, as well as bathing, feeding, dressing and yes, diaper changing our charges! Learn more by attending one of the following open houses Monday, December 22, 1:00 – 4:00 p.m., Tuesday, December 23, 4:00 – 7:00 p.m., Friday, January 9, 3:00 – 6:00 p.m., and Saturday, January 10, 11:00 a.m. – 3:00 p.m. KPC Kids' Place also needs Diapers, Wipes, Formula Packages, Pajamas, Bus Passes as well as Grocery Dis-



FULLPOWER

Launched locally in 1994, FULLPOWER teaches people confidence, by providing hands-on on empowerment training for adults who want to walk with confidence and awareness, set healthy, clear boundaries using their voice, body, stance and spirit, and, if necessary, use physical techniques to keep themselves and their children safe from abuse, assault, or attack. Contributions to this work come from law enforcement, martial arts, educators, and therapists. With support from the Independence Community Fund, Full Power will expand its services and create a safer community by reaching out to previously under served and at-risk populations.

Get Involved: Attend a free Community Training Forum – Friday, January 23, 6:00 – 8:00 p.m. Or participate in our next 5 hour basic empowerment and self-protection workshop on February 7, 2004. Workshop space is limited. Also seeking volunteers who believe in our mission to serve on our Advisory Board, or help with administrative tasks. We also need 2 desktop PCs (Windows 2000), copier